

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 002997

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR PRM/IRIS/BARONE AND WHA/CEN/PIERCE
BOGOTA FOR COLLEEN HOEY

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREF PHUM](#) [PGOV CO](#) [PM LABOR HUMAN RIGHTSPOLMIL](#)

SUBJECT: PANAMA REFUGEE NEWS: GOP COOPERATES, COMMISSION
ACTIVE

REF: PANAMA 813

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Since the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) established a permanent office in Panama in April (reftel), the GOP has cooperated increasingly with the UNHCR and other NGOs to assist the approximately 821 displaced Colombians in the Darien border area. Under the Torrijos administration, the Panamanian Refugee Commission has done an about face - convening frequently to diligently deliberate on its 75-case backlog. The UNHCR expects the Refugee Commission's outstanding cooperation to decline as the typical refugee in Panama changes from poor border-crosser to middle class plane passenger and the Commission is flooded with applications.

GOP ASSISTS DISPLACED COLOMBIANS

2. (SBU) In the last six months of the Moscoso administration, the GOP improved cooperation with the UNHCR and other NGOs in providing services to the approximately 821 displaced Colombians in the Darien border area. The GOP placed a member of the GOP refugee agency (ONPAR) in Jaque on Panama's Pacific coast and in El Tuiria in central Darien. While still reluctant to classify them as refugees, the GOP worked with the government of Colombia and the UNHCR on steps to regularize the status of the displaced Colombians.

3. (SBU) Under the Torrijos administration, GOP assistance and cooperation with NGOs consolidated. In November, the UNHCR helped marry 21 mixed Panamanian/Colombian couples in the Darien, a step in qualifying for a visa. For the first time, the GOP also helped register children born to displaced Colombians.

NEW TREND: ENTRY BY AIR

4. (SBU) According to Panama UNHCR Representative Gonzalo Vargas Llosa, the face of refugees in Panama changed over the past year. As the security situation along the Colombian border improved, poor, rural, indigenous Colombians no longer cross into Panama to flee violence. Instead, small-scale Colombian entrepreneurs and plantation owners flee to Panama by air, generally after refusing to pay the "vacunas" (payoffs) demanded by insurgents. These Colombians have no problem showing Panamanian immigration the \$500 required in order to enter Panama.

REFUGEE COMMISSION: DRAMATIC IMPROVEMENT

5. (SBU) Under the Torrijos administration, the GOP's adjudicator of permanent refugee cases, the Refugee Commission, dramatically improved. After receiving training from the UNHCR, the Commission met for a day and a half in November and reviewed 25 cases, approving 12 and deferring 5 (which the UNHCR also expects to be approved). Because of derivative benefits for family members, at least 50 people will gain legal status through the November meeting.

Although not required by law, the Commission is scheduled to meet again in December to reduce the remaining backlog of 50 refugee cases.

16. (SBU) UNHCR Representative Vargas Llosa was especially impressed with the careful attention Vice Minister of MOGJ Olga Golcher gave to presiding over the Refugee Commission, noting that her performance was "like night and day" compared with Vice Minister Perez under the Moscoso administration. Despite a decree requiring the Commission to meet every three months, under the Moscoso administration the Commission met only once during its last 18 months in office, reviewing ten cases and approving only two.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) The Refugee Commission's expeditious and successful resolution of refugee cases is not sustainable. The current 50% approval rate is on the high-end globally. Many new-trend middle class Colombian refugees are likely to file petitions in response to the Commission's favorable rulings. The UNHCR expects the Commission's record to decline as the Torrijos administration becomes wary of placing its imprimatur on large numbers of Colombian applicants and their families. Panamanians are sensitive to the large numbers of recent Colombian immigrants working illegally in Panama.

WATT